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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HIGHLIGHTS U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN MINDANAO

REF: 07 MANILA 2422

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On May 19 and 20, the Ambassador traveled to the economically-booming Davao with the Agricultural Counselor, USAID Mission Director, Joint U.S. Military Assistance Officer, and econoff to spotlight our multifaceted engagement in Mindanao. Visits to educational, environmental, and commercial projects underscored the broad range of U.S. projects and interests. The Ambassador had a productive meeting with the incoming regional Philippine military commander. The visit received extensive national and regional media coverage. END SUMMARY.

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EDUCATION OUTREACH IN MUSLIM AREAS  
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¶2. (U) The Ambassador delivered the keynote address at an Embassy-hosted dinner marking the start of the "My Community, Our Earth" partnership. The \$80,000 grant program from the Bureau of Oceans, Science and Environment is administered by the Association of American Geographers and provides technical training to 35 middle and secondary school educators on the use of geographic information systems (GIS) to support environmental education in Mindanao. Over 70 guests attended the dinner, including teachers and official representatives from the local chamber of commerce; the Muslim Business Forum President; the Regional Director of Muslim Affairs; the Department of Trade and Industry Secretary of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, and the Department's Bureau of Oceans, Science and Environment. Over a twelve-month period, the program will develop and distribute innovative educational resources to support eight student-led projects to address environmental issues.

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INAUGURATION OF NEW USAID PROGRAM HEADQUARTERS  
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¶3. (U) The Ambassador, together with the USAID Director, inaugurated the Growth with Equity in Mindanao Program's new headquarters in Davao City. This USAID program is in its third phase of implementation, with a wide range of activities intended to expand economic opportunity and strengthen peace in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. The Ambassador noted that partnerships with the Philippine government, local government units, and the private sector had been instrumental in creating new economic opportunities and improving the quality of life across Mindanao. The Ambassador also lauded the program's efforts to ensure that the people in the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao receive the benefits of U.S. government assistance.

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EASTERN MINDANAO COMMAND (EASTMINCOM)  
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¶4. (SBU) Major General Armando Cunanan and his staff briefed the

Ambassador and a JUSMAG representative at the Eastern Mindanao Command (EASTMINCOM) headquarters. Although it was his first day in command, Cunanan was delighted to host his visitors. He explained that EASTMINCOM's main focus is on the fight against the New People's Army (NPA) guerillas while the neighboring Western Mindanao Command (WESTMINCOM) focuses primarily on threats from the Abu Sayaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). General Cunanan's staff officers said that the military is on track to achieve its goal of defeating the NPA by 2010, and Cunanan added that the NPA and other terrorist groups could be defeated only through a combination of military operations, good governance, and respect for human rights. He thanked the Ambassador for continued U.S. support in these areas.

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MEETING WITH MINDANAO PEACE ACTIVIST  
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15. (U) The Ambassador met privately with Mary Ann Arnado, a Davao-based attorney and peace activist with the Bantay Ceasefire, a civil society group monitoring the 2003 ceasefire between the GRP and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Mindanao. As one of the leading peace activists in Mindanao, and as an observer at the peace talks, Arnado talks to stakeholders on all sides. While the May 18 appointment of newly-retired general Hermogenes Esperon Jr. as presidential adviser on the peace process has led some observers to publicly question the Arroyo administration's seriousness about peace negotiations with Moro separatists, Arnado said she is keeping an open mind. Expressing enthusiasm for a U.S. role in the peace process, Arnado stressed that there is no substitute for continued strong Embassy engagement.

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VISIT TO MARS COCOA DEVELOPMENT CENTER  
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16. (U) The Ambassador and the Agricultural Counselor toured the Mars Cocoa Development Center (MCDC), located 30 kilometers from Davao City. Founded by the U.S. candy and confectionary company Mars, Inc., the MCDC provides training to farmers to help them establish and expand cacao production in Mindanao. As part of USDA's SUCCESS Alliance Program, the center provides training for cacao farmers on breeding, good agricultural practices, integrated pest management, post harvest practices, and cacao quality control. The Philippines produces 6,000 tons of dried cacao beans annually but imports 30,000 tons for domestic use alone. By increasing domestic production and improving crop quality, domestic and export markets for cacao have the potential to create expanded opportunities for small-scale local farmers.

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VISIT TO THE PHILIPPINE EAGLE CENTER  
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17. (U) The Ambassador toured the Philippine Eagle Center, located 45 minutes from Davao City. The center is home to 32 Philippine Eagles, 16 of which are captive-bred. The Philippine Eagle is one of the largest eagles in the world. Unfortunately, it is also one of the world's rarest and most critically endangered, with about 500 pairs remaining on four islands in the country. Although the center's exhibits are used primarily to help educate the public on conservation, the facility is also considered a major tourist attraction in the region. The center is operated by the Philippine Eagle Foundation, an NGO regarded as the country's premiere organization for the conservation of the Philippine Eagle and other endangered birds of prey. The foundation received a \$20,000 grant from USAID in 2003, and it is now sustained through donations from corporations and private donors.

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CLEAN AIR YOUTH ALLIANCE LAUNCH  
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18. (U) The Ambassador led the launch of the Clean Air Youth Alliance Davao Chapter, a group of youth organizations promoting clean air. An initiative of USAID's Energy and Clean Air Project, the Clean Air Youth Alliance has other local chapters in Metro Manila, Baguio-Benguet, and Cebu with approximately 10,000 members from 34

youth organizations. During the program, the Ambassador turned over an opacimeter, a device used to measure vehicular emissions, to the Davao City government represented by Vice Mayor Sara Duterte, daughter of Mayor Rodrigo Duterte. USAID is providing emissions testing equipment to local government partners to support their emissions reduction program.

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INTERVIEWS WITH BROADCAST AND PRINT MEDIA  
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19. (U) The Ambassador gave a live interview on the ABS-CBN TV morning news and variety program "Good Morning Mindanao," and she was interviewed live on the Bombo Radyo Davao public affairs news show that also linked in regional stations from Cebu, Baguio, Cotabato, Naga, Iloilo, Cagayan de Oro, Tacloban, Zamboanga and Manila to participate. An additional 12 stations broadcasted the interview as well as a simulcast online. The interview was replayed nationwide on the evening news show. The Ambassador also interviewed with the Sun Star, the top daily newspaper in Davao. The local media covered the Ambassador's participation at a ceremony at the Ateneo de Davao University marking the opening of the Clean Air Youth Alliance and the launching of the USG funded Mindanao teachers' workshop. Throughout the two-day visit to Davao, the Ambassador's comments highlighted U.S. engagement and development activities in Mindanao and announced the May 29 arrival of the hospital ship USNS Mercy to conduct a two-week medical mission in the region.

KENNEY